EMBODYING ECLECTICISM FROM POTENTIAL TO ACTUALIZATION

by

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STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines a disjunction, or marked contrast, between dance training encompassing diverse and multiple approaches and the increasingly narrow representations of modern dance in technique and choreography. If modern dance is to be understood as deriving from a belief that dance can constitute a form of individual, artistic expression, then its over reliance on limited forms must be called into question. The critical and creative examination, based on creative and theoretical research presented herein, gives way to a central argument: If it is to evolve, and better reflect the complexities of modern life, contemporary dance must return to its earlier emphasis on personal and boundless artistic expression.

This paper presents a compositional method driven by dancers' eclectic training in the choreographic process. In doing so, creative and theoretical research is utilized to contend that somatic practice and improvisation combined with multiple dance techniques yields a more inclusive, relevant, and vital vision for contemporary dance.

For Myles

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PREFACE

This work began as a testimony. It was a reaction to provocation. As a dance artist, I felt backed into a corner, challenged, needing to justify myself, and my art in the realm of modern dance. I wanted to prove that my wildly eclectic background and training experiences added up to more than just the sum of their parts. I hoped to create work that would confront the unspoken biases in contemporary choreography, igniting a conversation on its future. But to get to the future, I needed to go back to modern dance's past, when it all began, and to trace the trajectory from there to here.

INTRODUCTION

From its beginnings, in the late 19th century, modern dance has harbored a core philosophy, a belief that dance is fundamentally a form of individual artistic expression. Initially, this meant there were no rules, categories, or limitations—only possibilities. However, over time, aesthetics emerged to impose an order, and techniques became codified, creative processes habitualized, and a discipline established (Anderson, 2002).

A dancer learning her craft today contends with a much larger body of dance knowledge that was unavailable to previous generations of dancers. This broader awareness of dance history can offer as many limitations as it can solutions (Au, 2012). To be viable in this competitive field, many dancers employ an eclectic learning process that crosses disciplinary boundaries and includes appropriations from various movement practices, existing dance traditions, and even training methods from other art forms (Bales & Nettl-Fiol, 2008).

In her article, "The New York Dancer," dancer Veronica Dittman elaborates on the ways independent dancers migrate between numerous styles of dance and physical practices. Dittman observes that, while some dancers base their technique in ballet and modern, many traverse an array of styles and practices from yoga to hip-hop, contact improvisation to salsa, following personalized training regimens according to their own whims and interests (Bales & Nettl-Fiol, 2008).

By engaging with a multitude of movement styles and approaches throughout a career, dance educator Jenny Roche (2011) believes dancers become "fluid and mutable bodies-in-flux with the creative potential to significantly influence the outcome of the choreographic process" (p. 105). Choreographers such as Bill T. Jones and Twyla Tharp have found ways to capitalize on this potential, creating either collaborative processes or eclectic works that make the most of what dancers have to offer. Yet many choreographers work within the limited aesthetic parameters of a particular style, and expect dancers to make their bodies over into whatever look is desired, rather than augmenting their diverse abilities (Roche, 2011). It is this contrast, found between the eclectic work of artists like Tharp and Jones and "modern work" of well-known choreographer's like Stephen Petronio and Doug Varone, that bears examination.

Although contemporary dance, by definition, reflexively denies the aesthetic dictates of a style, there is still a look and set of expectations choreographers are compelled to adhere to, to be considered "contemporary." This unacknowledged construct is revealed in the similarities of what gets presented as contemporary dance on the concert stage. The construct is reinforced by challenges put to artists, who self-describe as contemporary, but whose work does not match expectations (Anderson, 2002; Chatterjea, 2013; Warren, Youngerman & Yung, 2013).

For example, choreographer Ananya Chatterjea (2013) derives her work from deconstructions of classical Indian dance and street theater, rather than Western forms. Despite the uniqueness and complexity of her work, Chatterjea says she is often asked how she can consider her work contemporary when she is still using footwork and hand gestures (p. 10). Chatterjea is not alone. Questions about what is traditional and contemporary are raised time and time again in interviews and reviews of artists who integrate non-Western

forms into their work (Asantewaa, 2014; Lukin-Linklater, 2013; Smith, 2008). Clearly the incorporation of movement from cultures beyond the West or outside the studio belies some people's understanding of what constitutes contemporary dance.

Classification as "modern" or "contemporary" connotes superiority in the dance field (Robinson & Domenici, 2010). For example, only modern dance has been deemed worthy of advanced study, as evidenced by its prominent role as the foundation of university dance programs and conservatories. In these settings, modern dance programs rarely associate with dance clubs, traditional or cultural dance groups, or other community dance activities (Kerr-Berry, 2012). Embedded in this notion is the belief that modern dance "is the best, most complex, intelligent dance form" (Robinson & Domenici, 2010, p. 214). But this perception ignores "the colonial legacy of racialized and class-based hierarchizations in the arts" that have led to its elite status (Kerr-Berry, 2012, p. 50). This thesis does not seek to vilify contemporary modern dance. It does, however, argue that if modern dance cannot embrace the "worlds" of dance around it, becoming inclusive of its surrounding community, it is in danger of becoming antiquated and irrelevant (Kerr-Berry, 2012).

This paper surveys the multidisciplinary, multicultural, and intercultural dance training landscape within the dance field at large in an attempt to dissolve restrictive limitations when composing contemporary choreography. The process involves applying the creative tools and philosophical framework of modern dance to an eclectic movement language generated through collaboration. Theory supports my contention that the eclectic embodiment at the heart of contemporary dance training provides an opportunity to dissolve "long-standing boundaries between so-called high and low art as well as the West and the rest" while opening up new possibilities for interconnection (Robinson & Domenici, 2012, p. 213).

By first examining then following in the footsteps of its first pioneers, this paper shows how modern dance can return to its earlier emphasis on personal and boundless artistic expression. By making an eclectic learning process the centerpiece of our choreographic practices, modern dancers can realize the inclusive vision of its original philosophy: a form of dance where, as the choreographer Helen Tamaris once said, "There are no general rules. Each work of art creates its own code" (Anderson, 1986, p. 153).

CHAPTER SYNOPSIS

Chapter 1, "Concept to Construct," reflects on the inclusive founding ideology behind modern dance, while simultaneously decoding the pervasive homogeneity of its present incarnation. Chapter 2, "Slash Hyphen Compound Combinations Modern Dance Subterfusions," explores hybrid and fusion dance forms that exist at the margins of modern dance, what they offer, and how they have come to be excluded from the larger cannon. Chapter 3, "Otherness: Appropriation and Exoticism at the Dawn of Modern Dance," examines how the first modern choreographers looked to other cultures for inspiration and ideas to conceive and create new forms and introduces the concepts of "dance tourists" and "dance explorers." Chapter 5, "To Do and Become," looks at dancers as subjects whose figurative migrations in training, and whose actual experiences of fission and fusion in performance communities, challenge the notion of fixed cultural identities. A discussion of embodiment and subjectivity theories from dance and performance studies as well as Braidotti's nomadic theory anchor this reflection and provide a philosophical framework for the analysis in the chapter. Chapter 6,"Take Apart/ Put Back Together," chronicles the creation and performance of two choreographic works. This creative research sought to utilize the eclectic training of dancers in a collage approach to compose dances that did not conform to a "contemporary" aesthetic but instead created their own rules and spoke to my personal vision. In my conclusion, I will elaborate on the ways I would like to see this research contribute to new understandings and practices in contemporary modern dance.

CHAPTER 1

MODERN DANCE FROM CONCEPT TO CONSTRUCT

Dance critic and historian Jack Anderson (1986) notes that, "No one ever really liked the term modern dance" (p. 153). It was always difficult to define and the name led to confusion. Though it was never intended as the name for a style or even *styles*, the label suggested a dance form or type, or perhaps a technique or system. Instead, what unified modern dance initially was the belief that like painting, dance could be a form of individual artistic expression. This belief is what drew me to modern dance as a teenager.

Like many little girls in the United States, I started my dance training in ballet, but I quickly found that the delicate feminine ideal of the form did not appeal to me. I switched to jazz and tap and dabbled in musical theater, but eventually felt that each of these forms required me to inhabit a role. Once I reached a certain age, my options in performance were exceedingly limited. I could be the ethereal nymph or princess in ballet or the vampy seductress or girl next door in jazz. I loved to dance, but suddenly felt my experiences performing did not live up to my experiences in the studio. When I was introduced to modern dance through books and a few courses at a local community college, it seemed to offer a solution to my growing disenchantment with dance.

Emerging in the early 1900s, American modern dance was "tied to larger cultural forces" including "utopian notions of freedom of the body and spirit, the quest for self-expression, and the vast potential of America," (Warren, Youngerman, Yung, 2013, p. 4).

Nearly a hundred years before me, the founding mothers of modern dance, Louis Fuller (1862-1928), Isadora Duncan (1877-1927), and Ruth St. Denis (1879-1968), had also found ballet and the popular entertainments of their day artistically unfulfilling. They rejected the pointe shoes, codified movements, and visual spectacles of ballet, along with the bawdy, vapid entertainments of Vaudeville. Instead, they borrowed ideas from "ballroom and social dance, exercise and spirituality regimes, and the cultural dances displayed at world's fairs and amusement parks" to craft their dances (Bock & Borland 2011, p. 22). In addition, they looked to artists, philosophers, and writers for inspiration and guidance (Au, 2009; Warren, Youngerman, Yung, 2013). The resultant work of each choreographer was unique, but all three emphasized artistry, emotional content, and depth.

Although many of the choreographic styles invented during the first generation (early 1900s) and also the second generation (1930-1960s) of modern dance (including Duncan, Graham, Horton, Limon, and Cunningham) continued to be practiced by some as codified techniques, the most pervasive "modern dance" was unaffiliated with any particular artist, but practiced by many. It is what is referred to as "modern technique" in audition postings and at university dance departments. It is the *thing* every independent dancer can identify but no one can explain to people "not in the dance world" (Hoff, 2010).

Many "modern technique" teachers cannot even explain it because while they may have mastered the qualities and movements at the physical level, many of them are unaware of their specific origins or significance. This is partially because, "non-codified modern dance," as it is sometimes awkwardly labeled, encompasses a greater variety than other forms, but also because it has become a sort of catchall category for modern dance trends; Humphrey and Weidman's fall recovery, Graham's contractions and spirals, Bill T. Jones' gestures, Trisha Brown's fluidity, and on and on, creating an ever-expanding vocabulary yet

an increasingly homogenized language.

The desired qualities and attributes for modern dance physicality are less overt than jazz, ballet, or codified modern, but just as pervasive. Though each choreographer seeks a distinctive quality, general movement tendencies have come about - an expressive torso, the show of effort, the release into gravity, and the use of the floor. When I began to take classes, I noticed a dancer did not need to be rail thin, as in ballet, but should be fit and proportionate. Movement did not need to be effortless, but should be efficient and maintain flow. I had to be particularly careful not to be too sharp, lest I give away my jazz background. Impressive virtuosity combined with a cool detachment was favored (wouldn't want to be caught trying too hard or appearing to care) and seemed to help dancers get jobs.

These aesthetic preferences troubled me because modern dance was not supposed to have a certain look; but it did. It was not intended to be a technique and yet, technique classes abounded; it should have been available to anyone but it wasn't. While there were dozens of different technique classes and even more choreographers and companies when I arrived in New York, there was a shocking lack of diversity in what was considered "modern dance." Choreographer Ananya Chatterjea (2013) echoes this sentiment when she writes that while the idea of contemporary dance, "seems to offer the promise of a range of aesthetics and a range of bodies from different contexts marking widely different understandings of beauty and power, the reality of what materializes on stage seems to suggest that there are some unspoken conditions for participation on the global stage that ensure some kinds of conformity" (p. 11). By way of example, I offer the following anecdotes.

Early in my time in NY, I was invited to a performance at PS 122 by my yoga teacher, who was also a choreographer. She was an amazing yoga teacher with a charismatic

personality, so I was pretty excited. There was a real buzz around the theater on opening night, and to my utter amazement, I found myself seated next to legendary ballet dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov. I don't remember much about the performance other than the absence of dancing, episodes of nudity, and some bobble head animal toys that were part of the set. Yet I do remember Baryshnikov and the rest of the audience sitting in rapt attention, all seeming to be in on some secret I just didn't get. I awkwardly congratulated my teacher, Sarah Michelson, after the performance then watched in astonishment as her career skyrocketed.

On another occasion, I went to see Stephen Petronio's work at the Joyce. His classes were always packed full of devoted dancers vying to work with him and his company seemed to be appearing everywhere. The work was a fast-paced whirlwind of legs, turns, and fifth positions. Gestures were abstracted and combined with rapid execution of ballet technique. At times, cast members partnered with one another pushing and pulling or launching into more movement, but always with vacant stares.

These two artists and concerts became representative to me of the two most prevalent styles of modern dance. The first I later learned is considered "postmodern" or "downtown." It had originated in the 60s when a group of artists working out of Judson church questioned the "naturalness" of modern dance techniques that could only be performed by trained professionals.

The Judson generation of artists rebelled against what modern dance had become, the way the early pioneers had against ballet. They viewed movement as problem solving, "not self-expression," and tossed out technically honed dance phrases in favor of movement "found" in daily life such as gesture and pedestrian means of locomotion (Bales, 2008; Warren et al., 2013). Many postmodern works are ironic, absurd, or pure abstraction. Sarah

Michelson's works are all of these and have also become known for transforming the performance space and being inclusive of architectural elements.

The minimalism favored by postmodernism may have made the work physically more available, but the abstraction and conceptualism driving much of the work made it accessible only to an educated elite. Foster notes "only an elite group of choreographers and viewers—white, educated, tracing its heritage from a European avant-garde aesthetic tradition—involved themselves in this assault on the theater" (Foster, 2002, p. 128).

Petronio's work better exemplifies "modern technique" and the new modern dance or "contemporary modern." Unlike early modern dance, it embraces aspects of ballet in combination with some postmodern inclusions such as gesture, pedestrian movement, and abstraction and the qualities of release and weight from earlier modern styles. It is virtuosic and fierce. The dancers who perform it are highly trained and "technical." While often dazzling, to me, these pure movement works are reminiscent of the way ballet was described at the moment artists like Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis felt the need to break away. They emphasize virtuosity and visual spectacle resulting at the expense of expressional content and depth (Au, 2012, p. 87).

Both these works, and modern and postmodern dance in general, seemed to share the same blank stare and impenetrability. I had no idea what was going on. I could appreciate the impressive physicality and athleticism of the Petronio dancers, but I didn't "get" anything. Similarly with Michelson's and other postmodern works, I was always left feeling lost. The turn toward pure movement initiated by postmodernists eliminated narrative, symbolism, and expression, making the movement the dance. Therefore, modern dance became about movement, further establishing a correlation between the movement vocabulary used and the look of modern dance. On its journey from philosophy to genre,

modern dance has acquired a language of movement, postures, and expressions, a look to costuming, a structure of classes, a distinguishable body type, as well as deeply entrenched memes and tropes.

CHAPTER 2

SLASH HYPHEN COMPOUND COMBINATIONS

MODERN DANCE'S SUBTERFUSIONS

Even as I immersed myself in the language of modern dance, my body did not grow into the proper shape to make beautiful lines or to represent entrenched movement tropes. I did not have an elite education, training, connections, or upbringing, and I never quite felt like I fit into the "modern or postmodern dance" memes. Fortunately, the New York scene where I was first trying to break into the dance circle encompassed enough diversity that each artist could find a niche. I eventually found my stride in the subgenres of modern dance, typically described as hybrid, fusion, multigenre, or other slash hyphen compound combination dance styles. Inhabited mostly by artists of color, these subgenres were concert dance that intermingled with social, traditional, and spiritual dance, pop culture and theater.

I found I was mostly drawn to Black teachers and hired by Black choreographers, including African, African American, and Afro-Caribbean people. On the surface, it may seem unusual that I gravitated towards a culture that was different from my own and a movement style I had never practiced. However, my compact muscular body had been honed as much by watching and imitating MTV as it had in ballet and jazz classes. It thrived in African rooted dances that called for quick powerful bursts of motion, complex coordinations, and polyrhythmic phrasings. More importantly though, this work was the most interesting to me. It compelled me to actively negotiate within my own dancing body

the ethnic mixing I saw occurring in society around me. Also, it allowed for passion, deep musical connection, and storytelling, which I longed for but felt were absent in "modern dance."

Working outside the construct of modern dance technique provided an alternate view of what contemporary dance could be and changed what I wanted to say with my body. And because they were drawing on diverse influences, the artists I worked with were meticulously crafting new dance languages from their unique experience, a process that more aptly resembled what I had imagined making modern dances would be.

The first company I worked for was contemporary Caribbean dance theater, the next a hybrid of modern, hip-hop, and house infused with spoken word. There was also Afrohopatazz, Neo Afro Folklore, and many others. These new labels allowed opportunity for inclusivity bringing diverse dance styles and voices into the dance fold, but they also reinforced the notion of modern dance as a separate style divided from the urban, pop culture, and ethnic forms we brought to it. An article on choreographer Kyle Abraham in Dance Magazine provides a recent example of the same type. In describing his choreography, the author writes, "Abraham fuses the rippled posturing of hip hop with the curves and weight of modern dance" (Elson, 2004, p. 24). The writer takes care to describe which qualities are hip-hop, "rippled posturing," and which are modern, "the curves and weight," clearly distinguishing modern as a distinct style. Dividing out these qualities reifies the aesthetic of each and maintains the exclusivity of modern dance. The problem with this is that it reinforces the notion that modern dance is the "higher art" and marginalizes the contributions of other forms to the choreography.

There are many complex factors that have contributed to the creation of these hybridized and hyphenated categories. Dance historian Brenda Dixon Gottschild's book

Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance provides a comprehensive look at how Africanist contributions to American cultural practices, including modern dance, have been "invisibalized" as a result of racial segregation and discrimination (Gottschild, 1996, p. 2). Major art forms, including music, the visual arts, and dance, have historically engaged in a systematic process where ethnic or cultural forms are absorbed and subsumed into larger styles, often erasing the original contributions of people of color.

Most significant for my research is the fact that by the time I began dancing, modern dance classes, presenting organizations and foundations, history courses and books had all begun referring to Black Dance and World Dance as separate but interrelated genres seen as different from Modern Dance.

Some artists, like Abraham, do cross over and become seen as part of the modern dance legacy (albeit as hybrid artists), but many more struggle for legitimacy in modern dance. I believe all of these artists and their work should be included under the larger umbrella of modern dance, but to pretend that they are always acknowledged there is to ignore the reality. Artists of color often get lumped together into the ambiguous and controversial categories of Black Dance or World Dance and excluded from the discussion in modern dance.

The divisions thrown up between different dance styles did not really concern me that much while I was in New York. Organizations like the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Harlem Stage, and BAAD regularly presented and supported hybrid, fusion, Black Dance, and World Dance works in addition to "modern" and postmodern ones and each style seemed to be flourishing in the larger scene. Although "fusion" might be used derisively on occasion (to suggest inferiority or lack of sophistication), more often, the fusion of different dance techniques, especially popular dance forms like hip hop or Latin dances, was used as a

way to "spice up" or "add flavor" to the choreography. Unfortunately, I discovered that even this approach tended to reinforce hierarchies, signaling that the real substance lay in the modern elements. Though I found this disappointing, I held fast to the idea that modern dance could be what I made it, seeking out the artists and work that spoke to me and continually striving to develop my own voice.

One of the choreographers I admire is Akram Kahn, who resists categorization of his work. Although several critics have suggested that Khan's movement is a mixture of two dance styles, Khan insists otherwise. He prefers it to be called a "learning process" that is produced from new ideas of exploring contrasting dance styles, resulting in movement decisions that are both sinuous and original (Smith, 2008, p. 85).

Here, Kahn describes the sort of process that resonates for me. I wanted to create work that did not fit easily into cultural categories, and that puts different dance traditions and dancers in dialogue with one another in a contemporary context. I wanted to compose new movement languages as well as new dances, while acknowledging the contributions of different dance styles and their cultures of origin. I wanted to negotiate the tension between tradition and modernity, cultural identities and self-fashioning, and explore intercultural and transcultural relationships between people. After several years of pursuing these desires and working on my own in New York, the idea of a University dance department as a dedicated space to hone my choreographic craft gained appeal. Thus, I decided to get my masters degree in modern dance.

It was in school that I again found myself caught in the contradiction between modern dance the philosophy and its style. I had come to school to develop my own artistic voice, to learn choreographic tools, to engage in discussions about contemporary art with a committed community of artists and scholars. I imagined having a daily physical practice

where I was guided by faculty members in honing and clarifying a distinct movement language. Instead, I found myself in modern technique classes and rehearsals – being told what to do, and more dishearteningly what not to do. I again began to wonder about the purpose of dancers' training and the limited scope of what had become modern dance. Eventually, I began disregarding technique I disagreed with or disliked or manipulating the combinations according to my preference.

My subtle acts of resistance were interpreted as "bad habits." It was implied that I was not making choices in my movement execution, but rather my "other training," as some of the faculty members began referring to it, had taken over. I heard, "I feel your 'other training' is coming through in your modern" and "we're going to get that Afro-Caribbean thing out of you," and even "I don't think this ethnic thing you do is working out for you."

These interactions made me acutely aware of the hierarchies within modern dance's structure. The corrections I was being given conformed to a Euro-American White orientation of modern dance. They suggested that I had the wrong kind of training, that I needed to "clean-up" my technique. While not attributable to all faculty members, these sorts of statements and sentiments were fairly common and indicative of department aesthetics. The comment regarding "other training" coming through in modern obviously engages in a division where "other training" is less valuable than canonical dance training.

The department approach, based on an undergraduate model, emphasized a baseline or foundation of modern/ballet technique, but that emphasis was so heavy that it deemphasized or even discouraged the exploration of other dance styles outside a strictly modern/ballet dance curriculum. Intentionally or not, the structure of the department has the effect of attempting to *sanitize* or deethnicize the approach of its students.

In this environment, I felt that the niche I had found for myself in the NY dance

scene was aberrant. Some of my fellow students even questioned why I was so into the "African thing" when I was "not even Black," betraying their belief that Black Dance was okay if it is connected to race, but not as a serious art form to be studied by artists of other backgrounds. I found this strange, given that I knew many of modern dance's early innovators had found their inspiration by stepping outside their own culture and championing ancient physical practices from India, Africa, and Ancient Greece.

How had modern dance come to look down on the art and dances of other cultures that had help shape it in the first place? How had other cultural dance practices come to be regarded as inferior when they had once been used to justify and legitimize modern dance? What had made modern dance what it is today?

The answers could be discovered by tracing the lineages of current modern and postmodern choreographers back to their source. For example, Stephen Petronio studied with Trisha Brown, who studied with Anna Halprin, who began her studies in the Denishawn school. Twyla Tharp (although she later embraced an eclectic approach) first danced with Paul Taylor, who danced with Martha Graham, who also studied at the Denishawn School. Once modern dance had succeeded in being recognized as an elite art form, new generations of choreographers began scaffolding on or rebelling against earlier iterations of modern dance rather than other forms. After attaining a level of success as solo artists, Duncan and St. Denis had codified their techniques, leading to the establishment of training systems within school structures modeled on the ballet academy. Modern dance programs were also founded in universities, furthering its establishment.

This legacy has produced a rich canon of modern dance techniques and works, but it has also led to the exclusion of other forms. In the process, an important element of modern dance's founding ideology has been lost.

In the following chapter, I reflect on our pioneers' cross-cultural intentions and embrace of different dance forms (Robinson & Domenici, 2010).

CHAPTER 3

'OTHERING': APPROPRIATION AND EXOTICISM AT THE DAWN OF MODERN DANCE

Anthropologists have traditionally described dance as representing a community's worldview (Bock & Borland, 201; Sklar, 2001). Through dance, an individual performer can make visible her alignment with the invisible values of the culture as a whole. However, dance also "offers the possibility for individuals to use the body as a medium for challenging such values" (Bock & Borland, 2011, p. 22). Embodying alternative ideals through dancing has been at the heart of modern dance since the very beginning—which, in part, is what makes the current turn toward exclusivity and division so alarming.

When modern dance began, ballet was the preeminent art form. Although it originated in French courts and harbored concepts and values of European chivalry, ballet reflected many upper-class American ideals. Every delicately sculpted thigh and finally pointed toe supported the standard of beauty and every story of a virtuous maiden conveyed moral values and stable gender roles (Albright, 2001, p. 30). When they rejected ballet, the early modern dance artists Louis Fuller (1862-1928), Isadora Duncan (1877-1927), and Ruth St. Denis (1879-1968) were demonstrating their defiance of social, political, and sexual norms of society.

To clearly distinguish their artistry from ballet, these artists needed a "new dance" that did not look like ballet, one that clearly differentiated itself from its Eurocentric

worldview. Since ballet's quality of technique came from cultivating "unhuman" and "unearthly" qualities, early modern dance artists decided that their new styles would be based on ideas of the "natural" or "earthly" body (De' mille, 1953; Warren et al., 2013). With the intent of reflecting a purer earlier form of dance, modern choreographers looked to the mythology, art, and dance of foreign cultures and ancient civilizations for inspiration.

Historian Jane Desmond (2001) writes that "in some high art contexts, the exotic was cast as a utopian vision of the past glories of classical civilizations" (p. 260). Isadora Duncan's sprightly dances were composed of simple hops, skips, and turns with delicate arms and easy grace imagined in part through her study of the art of Ancient Greece. Dance scholar Ann Daly suggests that by deploying the Greeks, Duncan was able to collapse art and "Nature"- a notion that could otherwise be seen as dichotomous (Albright, 2001). Similarly, Ruth St. Denis couched the sensuality and spiritual rejuvenation found in her choreographies as inspired by ancient Eastern traditions.

Though some now criticize the work of Duncan and St. Denis for its cultural appropriation and St. Denis specifically for exoticism in both cases, the discourse of the "other" culture was crucially important to sparking new conceptions and resisting dominant ideologies. In his *Essay on Exoticism*, scholar Victor Segalen (2002) wrote, "exoticism's power is nothing other than the ability to conceive otherwise" (p. 19). As such it can represent a liberatory tool for artists seeking to stake out diverse artistic positions and transcend boundaries (Bock & Borland, 2011).

That is not to say practices of exoticism and cultural appropriation are not without failings. History is littered with examples of cultural appropriation leading to exploitation of marginalized groups and exoticism resulting in oppressive misrepresentations and colonial rule (Uwujaren, 2014). Gottschild offers a nuanced reading of appropriation versus

inspiration in much of her research on Black diaspora in dance. The liberatory power of exoticism and cultural borrowing is connected to larger issues of privilege and power that cannot and should not be ignored (though they fall beyond the scope of this paper). Nevertheless, it is also clear that to now treat the arts and ideas of others as off-limits is to stifle innovation and close off a powerful avenue for self-fashioning that helped inspire the creation of modern dance to begin with.

Even in traditional communities, folklorist Dorothy Noyes has identified cultural borrowing as a foundation for creativity. "Rejecting the paradigm of folklore as in-group practice, she asserts that 'communities do not create their culture sui generis from their unique soil: they select and combine forms in general circulation according to their possibilities and with a competitive eye on the creation of their neighbors,'" (Bock & Borland, 2011, p. 2). In proposing a return to the early vision of modern dance and the inclusion of eclectic movement vocabularies, I am not advocating cultural appropriation or a return to the age of exoticism. Rather, I am suggesting dancers approach their experiences in other forms as an opportunity to "conceive otherwise."

To avoid the failings associated with the exoticism of the past, it is crucial that we do not approach the other in a consumerist, mimetic, or representative manner, but rather, that we conduct the sort of learning process described by Kahn, where the exploration of contrasting dance styles is rooted in intercultural dialogue and results in new ideas and original expression.

Dance writer Edward Warbuton (2010) provides another way of looking at these two approaches. The former he describes as "dance tourism" dropping in and out of dance practices, "accumulating movement vocabularies like frequent flier miles, but only skimming the surface of the culture" (p. 104). And the latter he calls "dance exploration" where

explorers seek meaning and embark on journeys of discovery, without a predetermined destination. This approach should be a relatively easy one for modern dance practitioners to embrace, connected, as it is, with its history and considering the numerous opportunities to encounter difference via eclectic dance training.

CHAPTER 4

DO AND BECOME

Unfortunately, much of the other training dancers receive today would fall into the "dance tourism" label described by Warbuton. Based on a perception of techniques as abstract tools, capacities, and abilities, dancers study many techniques in order to build up a repertoire of movement possibilities. However, opportunities to embark on journeys of discovery abound if we are willing to seek them.

Dancers often include other techniques and physical practices in their regimens to make themselves more competitive. This trend has evolved because the dance economy has changed, making sustained work with an individual choreographer or company rare (Bales, 2008). The project-by-project or freelance environment of dance now requires dancers be versatile "dancers for hire" (Bales, 2008). As a result, dancers today rarely practice only one style. To make a living, dancers may not work exclusively in modern or concert dance, but instead combine teaching at studios, schools, or gyms, taking commercial gigs in videos, concerts, industrials, theme parks, or cruise ships and any number of other dance-related jobs. Initially, I embarked on much of my training in service of my various teaching jobs, which sustained me financially as I performed, or in preparation for a specific hybrid choreographic project.

Additionally, most of the dancers competing for jobs in concert dance come out of similar university contexts, and truthfully, they are all really good at modern dance. Having

an additional "something" can give a dancer an edge in audition. Dance educators Robinson and Domenici (2010) articulate some of ways they believe certain other techniques can benefit dancers in modern dance: "Ragtime dance could teach methods for rhythmic play; hip hop teaches impulse and acrobatic virtuosity; samba can teach students about dynamic equilibrium and instability; and capoeira teaches exciting ways of relating to music as well as inversion strategies (p. 218).

The idea of training as acquiring a collection of tools, skills, coordinations, patterns, or simply curious shapes emerged during the Judson period. The artists of the Judson era decried technique, but many of them did not get rid of it entirely. In fact, many still took dance classes, including ballet, "to stay in shape." They also began to seriously study other forms of physical practice like martial arts and yoga (Bales, 2008). Previously dancers' training would include exercises and dance phrases in classes in support of choreographic repertoire, but beginning with Judson, this need not be the case.

The idea behind training shifted to be one about coming into relationship with the body and its capacities rather than of disciplining the body into a specific form. This created opportunities for dancers to step outside the given path in dance training and seek new avenues to explore their potential. Wendell Beavers, an educator and choreographer working in the postmodern tradition, has written that "technique arises out of the necessity of knowing how to do something," but that such necessity is "directly attached to glimpsing one's own possibilities" (Bales, 2008, p. 127). As dancers have needed to know new things to remain competitive or to do a certain job, they have been introduced to the possibilities present in other forms, and those possibilities have created their own necessity. With the prevalence of styles available now, modern dancers cannot help but gravitate towards the promise presented by additional technical training to grow and improve.

Thus, dancers participate in many types of dance training, but mostly at the level of technique. While this can lead to new movement knowledge, viewed in this way, training is reduced to skills and what the body can *do*. But techniques are not just actions the body can perform. Techniques are the embodiment of cultural knowledge and a gateway into new understandings (Sklar, 2001, p. 30). By treating techniques merely as toolkits, modern dance misses a powerful opportunity for discovery. In order to approach dance exploration, dancers must cultivate awareness of their embodied experiences and engage in dialogue to understand its embedded meanings.

Embodiment is a way of knowing of and through the body. Bonnie Bainbridge-Cohen (2008), the inventor of Body Mind Centering technique, describes it as "the cell's awareness of themselves" (p. 157). Humans have always been embodied, but previously, it was believed that there was a split between the intelligent mind and the instinctual body, known as Dualism. Now, evidence from scientific disciplines including neuroscience and developmental psychology have come to the consensus that movement and our awareness of it, shapes "the way we come to be conscious of ourselves, to communicate with others, and to live in the surrounding world," (Gallagher, 2005, p. 1).

Embodied experiences can communicate things in a way watching, reading, or listening cannot. In a bone-to-bone, muscle-to-muscle, cell-to-cell exchange, embodiment reveals ideas and feelings about strength, power, beauty, intelligence, confidence, sensuality, connection, play, surrender, and even transcendence. Viewed through this lens, the dance forms listed above - ragtime, samba, hip-hop, capoeira, among others –could not only equip students with new skills but also provide a "unique bodily experience that cannot be duplicated with words" (Sklar, 2001, p. 31).

However, dance scholar Deidre Sklar (2001) points out "one has to look beyond

movement to get at its meaning" (p. 31). Simply studying the technique does not reveal the symbolism, function, significance, or relationship of the movement to the dance. To get at the larger meanings, one has to move into language. That is why to become a dance explorer, both embodiment and intercultural dialogue are essential. Educators Robinson and Domenici (2010) agree and go even further, suggesting that the mere inclusion of different dance practices (in institutional settings such as universities) leads to the ghettoization and marginalization of nonmodern dance. Instead, they advocate an integrative approach that combines the study of technique with classes in composition, pedagogy, and history to provide opportunity for creating connections, exploring combinations, and comparing the internal logics of different dance forms" (p. 215).

The embodiment of otherness and intercultural connection advocated by Sklar, Robinson, and Domenici mark clear distinctions from the exoticism of the early modern dance pioneers. While Duncan, St. Denis, and others found inspiration in other cultures, they often did not have direct encounters. They did not study the dances from a master of the tradition or engage in conversations with its performers. They did not witness other dances in their context of origin nor study their specific histories. Their exoticism relied on distance and imagination, whereas embodiment offers intimacy and wisdom. Embodied practices still provide opportunities for self-fashioning, but do so without engaging in misrepresentation, thus permitting greater possibility to absorb the merits of otherness without the failings.

That said, appropriation and representation are still controversial issues in dance. Though eclectic embodiment is occurring at the level of training, it is not currently in the performance space. This is problematic because modern dance is supposed to be an inclusive art form, yet there seem to be invisible barriers impeding the embrace of this

eclecticism in dance making. If as Melanie Bales (2008) notes, "training is the medium through which movement ideas are born, transmitted and transformed," it should follow that expansion in training should lead to an expansive understanding of modern dance (p. 10). Yet this variety has not redefined contemporary dance; instead it has positioned it more squarely as a form "above" many. I believe that this is because technique is understood as something the body can *do* but performance is still understood as *who we are*.

Currently, choreographies are perceived as representational of the choreographer (Roche, 2011, p. 106). "Traditional," "cultural," and "spiritual" movement are accepted (as fusion) in modern dance when they are perceived as part of the choreographer's ancestral heritage or cultural identity. As a result, influence from other dance styles can be obscured, transformed, or negated if it does not correspond to the choreographer's socio-cultural identity. For example, Gottschild (1996) concludes that *all* of American art forms have been touched by Africanist influence, but much of it has been hidden and denied as a result of the vilification and fear of peoples of African descent throughout American history.

By engaging with movement from other cultures only at the level of technique, modern dance appears to be continuing this trend of obfuscation. Whether it is due to fear or as an effort to respect and protect other cultures and their creator communities, modern dance is carrying on a custom of appropriation and reinforcing an essentialist view of dance rather than entering into creative processes of integration or intercultural collaboration (Bock & Borland, 2011).

As a White dancer participating in African diasporic dance communities, I was frequently involved in conversations regarding ethnic identity and cultural ownership in dance. Many artists reject that whole line of thinking as limiting. However, there are probably an equivalent number of artists who, despite their knowledge of the extensive

training required to attain proficiency in any form, still hold the idea that skills "are in the blood" and/or connected to heritage. There are probably many more who fluctuate in between these two extremes. Conversations about "innate abilities," "natural gifts," "coming by it honestly" in connection to race and ethnicity pervade the dance field, even after decades of struggle to eliminate the essentialist prejudice that prevented people of color from being accepted in ballet.

The resurgence in essentialist ideas in dance coincided with the popularity of multiculturalism in the 80s and 90s. Multiculturalism was introduced to promote cultural diversity, instead of assimilation in societies with numerous different cultural different groups (Bennet, 1998). It has led to a proliferation of multicultural festivals, fairs, and performances that showcase and celebrate distinct "authentic" cultures (Bennet, 1998). Around this time, modern dance choreographers of color also began focusing on issues of individual and community identity in their choreography (Warren et al., 2013). This has led to some phenomenal work and the elevation of choreographers who might have been overlooked in early decades. However, a drawback of multiculturalism is that "it addresses racial and ethnic difference as a question of identity rather than history or politics" (Bennet, 1998, p. 4). An embrace of multiculturalism in modern dance has led in many cases to an adherence to essentialist views rather than to refashioning and even exploding of identity, through the imagination and interpretation of the experience of others (Kerr-Berry, 2012).

Often times, essentialist views are not admitted outright but are be revealed in casting choices (racially segregated dance companies) or casual conversations. For instance, many of the Black artists I worked with tended to negate my Whiteness as a way of accepting it. They would say things like, "you're not really white, the Portuguese, you know, you probably got a little somethin, somethin." Or they would point to my nose, my butt, or

my skill at West African as proof that somewhere in my ancestry, I must have some Black in me that would justify my interests and abilities. While it's true that my ancestry is a bit ambiguous, if I ever considered emphasizing my Portuguese ancestry in order to "pass" as more ethnic and therefore more naturally gifted at my chosen style of dance, all I ever needed to do was go home for a weekend to remind myself of the *Whiteness* I come from.

My truth is that my talent is not *natural*, it is *learned*, but to me, that does not mean it is any less authentic. It comes from authentic lived experience, a process of becoming that did not cease with the formation of my DNA or when I left my parents' house, but one that I continue to shape and be shaped by. Like many dancers, when I began studying other forms, I expected to engage with them only at the level of technique, but over time, through embodying movement and interacting with different communities in the process, it came to have a transformative effect on my sense of self, what I valued, and the way I saw the world.

Choreographer Akram Kahn has said, that the body "is a sponge, it absorbs from its surroundings, if those surroundings become varied, so to becomes the body a varied accumulation of movement ideas, tendencies, aesthetics and ways of knowing" (Smith, 2008). Once absorbed, the body does not passively retain everything it has experienced. The lived body/mind is in a constant process of assimilating, connecting, rejecting, transforming, forgetting, becoming, and coming undone. The journey of discovery I embarked on not only equipped me with new skills but also provided seedbeds for multiple hybrid identities that are complex and nomadic (Braidotti, 2008; Evans, 2010; Robinson & Domenici, 2010; Smith, 2008).

The numerous styles dancers engage in dance training and the many communities they inhabit as they move between different performance communities destabilize notions of a unitary self. "This aligns with the postmodern Deleuzean view of multiplicity that regards

individuals as multiplicities, and subjectivity as 'not a stable given'; but rather a 'collective' subjectivity which is to be produced" (Roche, 2011 p. 111). Scholar Jenny Roche (2011) has referred to the unique way of moving that arises from a multiform approach to training, a dancer's "movement identity" (p.111). Unlike bodies, which are socially situated according to race, sex, gender, nation, and class, movement identities encompass a dancer's experiential terrain and reflect their tendencies, preferences, and physical abilities. They are a "corporeal portfolio of enfleshed experiences and embodied paradigms" that is ever-evolving (Roche, 2011, p. 114). The nomadic nature of dancers' experience means movement identities may or may not correspond to external markers of "identity" and may encompass paradoxical and conflicting values.

This has been the case for me. My movement identity includes the rippling undulations from Cuban rumba, percussive jumps from sabar, sharp lines from jazz, swiveling hips from salsa, and a subtle weighted groove from house, in addition to qualities like fall and release from "modern dance technique" or pirouettes from ballet. I draw on what speaks to me as a mover, resulting in original expression that is a momentary actualization of my embodied experiences.

Yet though the language of other cultural dances spoke to me, my body did not *represent* a Black or Latina experience and that has sometimes been controversial. In Art and Fear, authors Bayles and Orlando (1993) claim that an artist's "reach as a viewer is vastly greater than [his/her] reach as a maker" (p. 52). They argue that while artists may feel a deep resonance with work that originates in another time, place, or with other people, "the art you can make is irrevocably bound to the times and places of your life" (p. 52). The trouble with this idea is that the times and places of our lives have become irrevocably bound up with arts and culture of other people and places.

If I were to try and make work that looked "modern" or suddenly took a renewed interest in ballet, the only art I could make would be bad art, because those forms, alone, have become foreign to me. Much of the time in my life has been spent in dance studios studying West African dance. I have come to know the symbolism, meaning, and rules to some of the movement, but that does not mean I would make "African dances." My experience is not of Africa, it is of a dance studio with people of many races, ethnicities, genders, ages, abilities, and backgrounds coming together night after a night in a room suspended 7 feet above the city street in common pursuit, negotiating cultural differences and learning from one another. That is the kind of experience I want to express in my work, but in its current state, the dance field offers few outlets for this expression.

I was once asked to perform my work in a festival known to be a showcase for artists of color. The presenter knew I was White, but included me, they said, because they thought the aesthetic of my work fit in with their vision for the program. When I repeated this to a friend, she questioned whether that would fly if I was blonde and did not have an ethnic last name. I did not want to think this could be true, but I knew it was possible. Author E. Patrick Johnson (2003) writes, "when white-identified subjects perform 'black' signifiers – normative or otherwise – the effect is always already entangled in the discourse of otherness; the historical weight of white skin privilege necessarily engenders a tense relationship with its Others" (p. 4). It is possible my appearance and ethnic last name have provided me some cover from accusations of appropriation, but I have never hidden my racial identity.

I recognize the tense relationship inferred by my white skin, but I also believe as Braidotti suggests that we must "inhabit the positions of power so as to change it" (Saleri, 2010). Privileging diasporic forms in my movement vocabulary is a way of advocating for their value, beauty, and importance beyond the enclaves to which they are often relegated. It

is an attempt to dismantle the hierarchy and rebel against the limited view of what is "contemporary" in modern dance. It is also a way for me to continue on my exploratory path, to be in a state of perpetual learning and growth, and to further enhance my fluency in the languages of dance.

The fixed and singular representations of "identity" featured in many modern dance performances contradict dancers real-life experiences, in which they are members of many shifting communities and inhabit multiple social roles. Author David Bennet (1998) argues "the recognition of differences between communities, or group identities, and between individuals who are members of such communities, must give way to recognition of differences within individuals, or the ways in which consciousness does not coincide with identity" (Bennet, 1998, p. 5). These differences between individuals should be what are of concern in modern dance, but the tendency to see individuals according to their identities as representative of particular groups impedes self-expression.

Philosopher Rosi Braidotti, the creator of nomadic theory, has written, "we will never arrive anywhere if we use identity as a starting point" (Saleri, 2010). Instead, she proposes we abandon identity and enter into the construction of subjectivity, which is a socially mediated process. Her concept of the nomadic subject is a subject that is grounded to a determined historical situation, embodied and situated yet also in a perpetual state of becoming (Braidotti, 2008). This allows us to acknowledge the differences that do exist yet remain in a process of becoming, "perpetually engaged in dynamic power relations both creative and restrictive" (Saleri, 2010).

The shifts that have occurred in dance training over the past decades reflect the larger shifts that have occurred in modern life. A world that is "technologically mediated, ethnically mixed and changing very fast in all sort of ways," gives rise to multiple options for

identities, bodies, and belongings (Braidotti, 2008).

Early in her career, Twyla Tharp expressed frustration with having "too many options" as a result of her training as a child in tap, baton, jazz, violin, piano, Graham, Cunningham, Horton, and ballet. But she eventually came to see that "each of these demands could come together to combine, ultimately, into something more than a patois of isolated techniques, become a new language, capable of saying new things – or old things in new ways." She became an *explorer*, eventually finding a place for herself amidst the "swirling kaleidoscope of choices" (Bales, 2008 p. 62).

To become the *dance explorer* described by Warbuton requires we recognize the imaginary or constructed nature of our boundaries, including the discourses of high and low art, race, ethnicity, gender, and ability, entering the unknown (Shapiro, 2008). Through embodiment and intercultural dialogue, we can learn how to inhabit the multiplicity already present in eclectic dance training and conceive of new ways of becoming. Applying this knowledge to our creative processes can result in choreography that resonates with the circumstances of modern life and the present human condition, one that is global and interconnected. Embracing nomadic subjectivity rather than fixed identities as a starting place for contemporary dance allows us to see choreography "as a manifestation of what it is like to inhabit this 'new world' revealed through the embodiment of culture as an 'in-between-space'" (Smith, 2008, p. 85).

CHAPTER 5

TAKE APART/PUT BACK TOGETHER

Art should be "the full payoff for all the things you have done"

(Bayles & Orlando, 1993, p. 56)

My works Such is Me and Grapefruit and Honey were respectively created in the spring and fall of 2013. In each, I sought to create eclectic choreography that served as a temporary resting place for a specific embodied identity that revealed the dancers fully for a period of time, albeit finite (Roche, 2011, p. 115). My creative research posed two broad challenges, first how could I be sure to get at the multiplicity of dancers' experiential terrain? And second, if the elements I uncovered were indeed disparate, how could I mold them together to form an identifiable "something?" (Warbuton, 2010, p. 106). To get at these questions, I knew I would need to not just develop a new kind of work but also a new way of working.

In previous work, I struggled to effectively teach or coach my style and the specificity of the techniques I drew on to dancers with different backgrounds. It seemed impossible within the logistical limitations that are ever-present in rehearsing to get beyond the broad strokes and big shapes into the more nuanced and subtle detail. Beavers describes, "dance's most neurotic moments" as occurring when "undigested technique dictates content" (Bales & Nettle-Fiol, 2008, p. 129). To avoid this, I knew that I wanted to use a collaborative approach in creating the choreography so I could build on what was already

present within my cast. The problem was I wasn't exactly sure how to go about it.

I am far from the first choreographer to seek out a collaborative process. In fact, in some ways, collaborative processes in varying degrees have become commonplace in modern dance. Arising out of a need to accommodate the variation of dancers' skills and styles combined with limited time and access to studio space, collaborative processes have been popularized by claims that they are more "democratic" and "individual," and that they lead to more unique work and greater performer investment. While I also sought these aims, I knew from my experience as a dancer that many of the "collaborative" processes I had been a part of did not live up to the hype.

The most common process, in my experience, is one that opens up movement generation to the cast via choreographic tasks or improvisation but leaves creative control exclusively with the choreographer. Once generated, the material may be hacked apart, mined for novelty, discarded, stripped of its uniqueness, or transposed to another body or bodies before being set according to the choreographer's design. Sometimes, for example, I have been asked to make phrases drawing from personal experiences such as childhood memories or violent encounters, only to later have the choreographer extract one movement or an arm gesture and insert it into a slick phrase or romantic duet where it was scrubbed of significance and texture. Rarely have I been in a process where it is developed into something substantive.

I find this process breeds resentment and exploitation, rather than greater investment in a reciprocal creative collaboration. Why should I be willing to contribute to someone else's art in such a personal way if I would not get a say in how it was used? I am not alone in my frustration with these types of "collaborative processes." The conversations in the halls and on the side of the studio space confirm that dancers don't like investing their time

and creativity in things that don't get developed and that they don't have a say in. They especially don't like listening to the choreographer take credit for it and talk about what a wonderful collaboration it was afterwards.

I was determined not to fall into this trap. I did not want to be a choreographer that showed up to rehearsals seemingly unprepared with only vague notions of what to do, expecting the dancers to inspire me. I wanted to craft an experience where the process would be enjoyable, in-depth, challenging, and most importantly, invite dancers' opinions. I decided I should begin by experimenting on myself to create a template for working with others. I deeply respect artists who "walk their talk," by clearly doing their own research and thorough preparation. I thought if I started with holding myself to a high standard of in-depth investigation, I could earn the trust and respect of the dancers with whom I hoped to work. I trusted that if I succeeded in creating this type of process, the resultant work would also succeed.

Such is Me

When the time came for me to begin my creative research, I also happened to be researching the late German choreographer Mary Wigman (1886-1973) for a project in dance history, and came across this description of her solo "Witch Dance" in her writings:

> For each choreographer, one work can be seen as bearing a unique signature through time. This work should be done when the artist's technical and artistic mastery has fully matured [though] it may not necessarily be the final work. The "signature work" that I propose is one that comes from an embracing of self, the realization that one's singular human experience can be expressed in a dance that is thoughtfully and meticulously crafted because the ideas and beliefs embedded in the work have been waiting many years to take on a definitive form. (Santos Newhall, 2009, p. 101)

While the phrase "technical and artistic mastery" gave me pause, I decided I would develop my new creative method by attempting to create a signature work that fully embraced my

eclectic experiences and was also a sort of testimony to my beliefs and ideas. I was not sure exactly what that would be, but I had been dancing for 30 years, surely I was harboring something within me that had been waiting to take on a "definitive form."

Inspired by Tharp (2003), I began by setting up a rigorous rehearsal schedule and took an oath to myself to commit to it no matter what. I chose to work in a mirror-less and windowless studio, free from distraction and a space not frequented by other dancers. At first, I was so eager to create a new process, that I would not utilize any existing exercises, scores, or guides, but after a couple awkward rehearsals alone in the dark room with the video camera, I decided I would need some sort of plan. How could I get at this eclecticism?

In the book, *The Eclectic Body*, Bales and Nettl-Fiol (2008) describe two different approaches, deconstruction and bricolage, upon which I decided to develop my work. Historically, deconstruction has been looked upon as a kind of "un-training," in attempt to remove artifice and learned gesture and get back to something more basic, structural, and human. On the other hand, bricolage means to assemble deliberately from found materials. I created scores based on each of these ideas and performed them for the camera as improvisations. My goal was that through the deconstruction scores, I would capture something of my "natural" or nonperformative body and that through bricolage, I would collect as much of the residue from my physical training as possible. In these early rehearsals, I never sought to generate or recreate these tasks. I treated each improvisation as a performance, sometimes imagining for myself a specific audience.

It was perhaps odd to try to do these things at the same time, but I felt the work required both clearing and sewing. Artists seriously committed to deconstruction often engage in somatic techniques over extended periods of time to rid their bodies of holding

patterns and habitual movements. I just dabbled in Feldenkrais work and Body Mind Centering techniques, so rather than have a lasting transformative effect on my body, my deconstructive efforts served more as creative limitations that prevented me from going to familiar places.

My process was not very scientific or methodical. If anything, it was ambulatory and random, flip-flopping from one thing to another. My deconstruction scores consisted of sets of minimal instructions like, "be boring," "be regular," "just stand," "walk around," "do normal tasks," "think about your bones," or "don't move until you have to move." Then I would switch to bricolage, putting on a fun song, dancing any way I felt, going continuously until I couldn't, trying to embody the music, remembering phrases and combinations from childhood, attempting to recreate music videos from memory, recalling specific times and experiences, and even imagining myself performing with another's body.

I put off watching the videos for a while. By the time I revisited them, it was with curiosity, but very little memory of how it had really felt. I became detached from my digital image. I even began referring to myself in the video as "her." Each video had such a different character and a different look depending on the scores I performed that day. Even when I showed clips of them to my classmates, they thought the dancer was a different person in the different clips. It did not seem to represent a singular human experience that Wigman had described, it was multiple and confusing. Where was the underlying consistency? How was I supposed to construct an identity or a signature from all of this?

My first instinct was to just edit interesting sections together digitally and relearn them, a true cut and paste. But cutting and pasting does not work the same in the body as it does with paper, scissors, and glue. As dance scholar and cultural critic Susan Foster cautioned in her essay "The Hired Body," "the body does not display its skills as a collage of

discrete style, but rather homogenizes all styles and vocabularies" (Bales & Nettl-Fiol, 2008, p. 64). Even though I had been successful at generating distinct movement in my improvisations, when I attempted to put them together in choreographic sequences, I found it impossible to maintain the different qualities. My body kept building transitions or blending things together, or it would not put the steps together at all and the piece would seem to be an odd assortment of unrelated movement ideas. How could I use what I discovered; what use was all the solo research if I could not turn it into something meaningful?

I did a few frustrating drafts with this method before ditching the editing idea. In expressing my concerns and setbacks with my class, I was asked if the content of my project was the method itself or if the method was searching for some content, or an idea to connect it? I had not given much thought to what the piece should be about. It was about eclecticism and me of course, it was a testimony, it was an autobiography, it was my signature… or it was supposed to be; but so far, all I had managed was a haphazard collection of steps.

I realized I hadn't really been looking at what the movement was telling me about myself. I had been exploiting my movement identity for novelty, much in the way some choreographers I had worked with had done in our "collaborations." I went back to the videos, not to edit, but just to look with these questions in mind; what did I keep going back to? What did I avoid? Who was I in the in between moments when I was just being, waiting, thinking? What was inviting me back in? The answers to these questions would become the dance. I would not try to make sure I had something jazzy and something African. I would not try to make it explicitly eclectic. It would be eclectic because of my experience.

An uncomfortable realization I had when I was looking at the videos again was that I was never just being. Even in my attempt at deconstruction, I was never still and I never looked relaxed. The "natural," "normal" body eluded me. Even when I was not dancing in my videos, my body was in constant motion. My body never rested, my body *stimmed*.

Stim is short for self-stimulatory behavior, but that's not exactly what it is. Stimming is something people with Aspergers or autism do to soothe themselves (Simone, 2010, p. 45). It wasn't that I didn't know my body stimmed before the videos. I have been hand flapping, finger twiddling, shaking, and repetitively rocking and beating myself for as long as I can remember, but the degree to which I have suppressed and controlled it, especially in public, had really marginalized my consciousness of it. But in the videos, it was undeniable; whenever I was excited by an idea or frustrated, or just thinking about something else that took me out of the present moment, I was stimming.

My family had always joked that I was autistic and I had secretly feared it was true, but instead of finding out, I had always worked diligently to appear normal. Suddenly, I had to know. Finding out I was on the Aspergers spectrum wasn't such a shock. In some ways, it was a relief to have a name and explanation for my physical and neurological differences. Everything was the same, but different all at once, like learning what I had always seen as blue was really green to everyone else. I didn't think about turning this revelation into choreography. But, as I continued to review my footage, it struck me that stimming was my "natural movement." This was the body language I was born with. It is perhaps the only physical thing I do that I did not have to learn, how could they not be part of my signature?

As I began to work on this piece, I kept going back to these gestures that were at once my natural vocabulary and also what I spent my life suppressing. A structure began to emerge where my stims would creep into and around the complex movement sequences I

developed. In many ways, dance had been my way of masking my difference, of disciplining my body to blend in with different communities. Suddenly, the piece was not so much about all the forms I had studied or the intersection of cultures and different subject positions. It was about the tension between public and private versions of self.

Embracing my stims and incorporating them into the work was not easy. There was a part of me that just wanted to make a "fierce dance" and worried once people saw me stimming they would think I was "retarded." Also, they were difficult to do on cue. I was so used to trying not to do them, that to try and do them felt odd. One day, I was rehearsing with a baggy sweatshirt on and after a tumbling floor sequence, it ended over my head covering my face. I was tired and the floor felt good so I lay there and suddenly found myself rhythmically pumping my back into the floor. This was to become the enduring image of both the dances I made during this process. By covering my face, I was able to tap into the sensation of being alone and from there, I could allow my body to respond *naturally*.

As I neared the end of my solo work, it didn't feel so much like an actualization as it did an unraveling. Threads that had once constituted the whole of something else were unwound only to be woven again "never toward a totalization of self-always toward continued individuation" (Manning, 2013, p. 3). Like Penelope at her loom, I could never bring myself to end the piece. It was an attempt at a containment of a stable identity, but it was cast in the shadow of the recognition that there is no stable identity once and for all. A professor of mine, Jon Scoville, described the work as reminiscent of a poet composing a poem, the initial spark of inspiration, then the first fervent scribbles, followed by the inevitable crumpling discarding and beginning again. Unable to decide on a definitive closing, I ended the piece as the whole process began, with an improvisation score, and with a poem that invited further becoming. The prose I found in *Such is Me* carried over to my

ensemble work*, Grapefruit and Honey*, that allowed me to apply the theories and practice of embodiment, eclecticism, and shifting movement identities.

Grapefruit and Honey

Choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui has said, every individual is a culture and "each collaboration is a cultural exchange" (Bendadu, 2013). It is one thing to consider how eclecticism manifests in the movement identity of a single embodied subject, but it gets more complex to explore interconnection between multiple, varied nomadic subjects. I do not believe this work would have much to offer if it could only result in solo choreographies. Once I conceived the idea of exploring the potential of movement identities, it felt imperative that I attempt to share this process and come together with others.

Utah, with a reputation for homogenous experience amidst a provincial worldview, may seem a strange place to engage in eclectic and intercultural work. It does not provide the same sort of extreme intercultural interactions as a place like NYC. On the surface, it is a more homogenous example of an American experience, but that does not make it or its subjects exempt from the multiplicity of modern life. In some ways, the superficial similarities of the dancers better served my research, in that movement identities are not entirely dictated by how a subject is socially, culturally, or racially situated. The dancers' movement identities encompass all their embodied experiences and experiential terrain and are activated in different contexts. And of course, as dancers, their embodied experiences had made them not as they would seem.

I considered this in casting the work. I didn't need dancers who looked different or served as some representation of an "other" experience. I needed dancers who were comfortable in their skins who could withstand and would even enjoy a process that involved a high degree of self-reflexivity and the continuous picking apart and putting back

together it entailed. I also really needed dancers who had a lot of experiences working in different styles and processes. In the past, I avoided popular and in-demand performers, believing they would treat my work like just another project and fearing the choreography would look like generic "middle mush." But, with this project, I needed the experiences, the maturity, and the work ethic of seasoned performers.

The dancers I chose, Ari Audd, Laura Brick, and Kylie Wright, each possessed these attributes. Kylie and Laura were both seniors who had performed with different choreographers in nearly every concert that had been presented in the department since they were freshman. Ari was a recent graduate of the program who had also been an active performer while a student and had gone on to be a sought-after performer by choreographers in the Salt Lake independent dance community. There were many other dancers who could fit the criteria I mentioned, but these three stood out to me. Each was adept at interpreting others choreography, but each also had a unique movement style and personality that seemed to strain at the seams of what they were typically called upon to do. These dancers were always asking questions and always wanting more. They went after every opportunity wholeheartedly but still had discriminating taste, keen eyes, and sharp tongues.

Ari, Laura, and Kylie came to our first rehearsals primed for the sort of "collaborative experience" I mentioned before. "Do you need our life stories? Want me to tell you about my latest heartbreak in a 30-second solo?" They asked. We laughed about the psychological tone of some rehearsals, but quickly moved on. I shared with them what I had discovered in my solo process and how I was more interested in what we could learn from our embodied experience and witnessing and understanding ourselves in movement than in "interpreting" or representing anything in particular. I made it clear to my dancers that I

expected them to have opinions, to question, and to disagree. It was my work, but they were not my materials, not my paint or clay. They were people and dancers interacting with the context I provided, a context that was as much about them as about me.

The Creative Process

The most significant challenge I observed in attempting to utilize my entire experiential terrain in my solo process was that accessing what is desired from the body's memory is tricky. The body has short-term, long-term, and hidden memory. Stored within the long-term memory are shortcuts and habitual patterns that have been honed through technical training, often referenced as muscular memory or instincts. These are ever-present and take effort not to do. The short-term memory contains steps and sequences a dancer has recently been working on, in class or another rehearsal. Hidden memory contains patterns and coordinations from previous dances or movement practices that have not been called on in a while but once triggered, flow back quite effortlessly.

I was interested in all these bodily memories; however, the short-term tendencies seemed to rest closest to the surface. My body would go to them first when I began to move. I often experienced this phenomenon when I came to my solo rehearsals straight from class. I would set out to do something different, when suddenly - a turn, floor pattern, or gesture sequence freakishly reminiscent of something I'd just done came out. Some dancer's work diligently to erase any traces of this inscription, but in my process, I decided to invite it. I told myself I invented the movement, therefore allowing myself to change it in any way I wanted. This kept me from panicking and removed the pressure to be original and authentic. In fact, it gave me a place to start on the days where the studio seemed like an empty black hole.

Eventually, I found this short-term memory to be a useful starting place for the dancers too. It was something technical and definite that helped get things moving. To eliminate the dancers' fears of not knowing what to do or being uncreative, I told them to steal everything. I encouraged them to begin improvisations by "starting with class" and then going from there. Often times, they didn't remember things perfectly and forgetting became a place of departure toward new ideas and personal choices. Once the movement was owned, it became fully inhabited and capable of being transformed into something that was simultaneously an echo of where they'd been, a glimpse into their present state, and platform for further invention.

The dancers' hidden memories revealed themselves most through casual conversations and playing around in the studio. I did not know the dancers well before casting them and often, our rehearsals dissolved into gossip, storytelling, and laughter. There were some scores that utilized music or memory recall to get at hidden physical memories, but mostly they came up spontaneously, triggered by familiar actions. Fittingly, many of the hidden memories were hidden in the choreography as well, in subtle movement references to Kylie's drill team days, Laura's competition routines, or Ari's hip hop. They became inside jokes buried in plain sight.

When it came to instincts, or long-term memory, the trick wasn't using it but trying not to use it. So I had the dancers perform the deconstructions scores I had done that were most effective at obstructing technique to arrive at new possibilities. Two that featured in the final work were "wringing out" and "conceal/reveal." Wringing out asked the dancers to attempt to literally wind and unwind different parts of their bodies like wringing out clothes; while conceal/reveal was more open-ended and attempted to get at some of the ideas I had discovered in my solo process such as "What do we try to show? And what do we try to

hide?"

Another score that became really important for the final work was "self-dissection." This score was new for the group work and came about because during our rehearsal process, my husband underwent surgery. I kept coming into the rehearsal studio with images of the body being cut open, removed, and placed aside to be inspected. It occurred to me that dissection was an apt metaphor for the work and the process of deconstructing our movement identities.

The rules of the self-dissection score were that a body part could only be moved by another body part, for example the hands could move the face but the hand could not just move independently. The score also required visualizing the anatomical connections and how they would be severed or manipulated to dissect the pieces intact. This score absorbed us. It became an irresistible puzzle we came back to again and again.

Interestingly, just as I discovered the content of my solo in the extraneous movement of my stims, the anchor of the group piece also came about through coincidence rather than careful planning. In Free Play, author Steven Nachmanovitch (1990) explains how artists' work often results from an encounter with the outside world:

> The artist has his training, his style, habits, personality, which might be very graceful and interesting but are nevertheless somewhat set and predictable. When, however, he has to match the patterning outside him, with the patterning he brings within his own organism, the crossing or marriage of two patterns, becomes a third pattern that has a life of its own. (p. 79)

All the other scores had resulted in unique movement for each of us and had contributed to our understanding of our own movement identities, but the self-dissection score was something we shared. It became the unifying subtext of all the other work, a physical manifestation of the process of itself.

As with my solo, I was stumped with what to do with all the material once it had

been generated. I had hoped we would have some sort of epiphany when watching the videos, as I had happened to me before. But the dancers bristled at self-watching. They did not detach from their images as I had. The video became evidence of how they did not meet their own expectations or projected ideals. They would cry out "Oh my god! What am I doing?" or comment on their bodies, clothes, hair, or faces. Watching the videos became unproductive and time-consuming. As much as I wanted them to have a similar experience to my own, I couldn't make them. Instead of watching all the videos together, I scrutinized them alone, asking the same questions I had applied to myself. Then, I went back to editing, but not to choreograph. Each edited video became another score, a string of ideas I had found in the videos.

I assigned a score to each dancer and worked with them to further develop it into a solo. Laura's drew heavily from the "wringing-out score." The material reflected her strong desire to be a great dancer matched with her awareness and frustration that "great" was constructed differently in different contexts. Her score featured pushing and pulling against her own body, reflecting her tendency to analyze and agonize over every correction or piece of advice she's given in her diligent pursuit of elusive perfection. Ari's score was rooted in her love of rhythm and musical interplay; it incorporated eclectic physicality from other parts of the piece and framed them in a way that most appealed to her current sense of dancing. Kylie's was the most open and remained mostly improvisation. It contained several ideas we had worked on designed to draw out the sense of play and fun she most appreciates in modern dance. My own scores reimagined ideas from my solo.

When I began, I had vague notions of the piece being a string of interconnected solos, but the structure never worked that way. I would love to say that at some point, intuition took over and the piece "sort of made itself," as I have heard others claim, but that

did not happen. The final structure of the work evolved through trial and error, cut and paste, writing and rewriting. The process for generating the movement had been intuitive, but getting at the structure was hard, perhaps because structure had never figured into my initial research questions. With time running out, I looked at what we had created and did my best to make decisions in how to show it.

The cast and I spent one evening listening to Nina Simone's song "Four Women" over and over again on repeat while we workshopped different sections. The song lyrics tell the story of characters based on four stereotypes of Black women, Aunt Sarah, the mammy or mother, Saffronia, the mixed child living between two worlds, Sweet Thing, a prostitute, and Peaches, a fed-up warrior. While we did not relate to the specific racial circumstances of the characters, each of us identified with the limited identity stereotypes women are typically ascribed both in our society and in the roles within the dance world. Within our work and within the piece, we were negotiating our different roles and identities in all their complexity and simply inviting the audience to witness us as we were. Dancer and philosopher Erin Manning describes "Becoming" as a continual process of individuation that is "expressed singularly and repeatedly in the multiphasing passage from the feeling of content to the content of feeling, a shift from the force of divergent flows to a systematic integration" (Manning, 2012, pp. 4-5). When I read this quote, it reminded me of performing *Grapefruit and Honey*. Each performance was an opportunity to reveal a moment of "Becoming" to capture that evening's version of the piece in a single incarnation. When the piece concluded, it encompassed the journey of its own creation, including honest self-scrutiny and self-reflection, playful mocking of ourselves as performers, and ultimately, a celebration of the complexity of our lives as modern women and dancers.

Once *Grapefruit and Honey* was performed, I received positive feedback from audience

members, as well as my thesis committee. I was also thrilled to see dancers in other pieces dancing along with us in the wings each night. And I was overjoyed when students would come up to me after the show and ask to be in my future work. The most frequent positive comments praised the strong performances and the movement vocabulary, which was referred to as rich, mysterious, complex, unique, or exotic. Informally, I heard "Oh I just love the movement," or "What beautiful dancers." Based on these responses, I believe the piece and the process used to develop it were successful at meeting the goals I had set for myself. However, I can also deduce from what was not said in the comments that the audience may have wanted more from the piece, that in some ways the parts, were still reading stronger than the whole, and that structurally, I could have done more to create a resonant "something" to leave the audience with.

One of the risks of eclectic choreography is that in drawing from broad and diverse sources, symbolism and meaning can become lost. Bayles (1993) notes that, "Without a broadly shared belief in the symbolism in the Cross and the promise of Heaven above, the cruciform design and towering spires of the great European cathedrals would have made no sense whatsoever" (p. 52). Similarly, if an audience does not recognize or identify with the material sourced in the eclectic movement vocabulary, it may be "cool," but meaningless. However, as choreographer's like Akram Kahn have shown, it may be possible to create something that takes on enough life of its own that it can be appreciated on many levels, where one need not know the intricacies and history of the components to appreciate how they function in something new, they simply do. I think to achieve this in future works, I will need to pay more considerable attention to structure. This might be more easily achieved if I am not also a performer in the work, but rather assume the role of "outside eye." Being in my work felt important when I began. The research felt most clear when I

took it into my own body, but when it came to assembling the piece, the inability to see was challenging.

Ultimately, I believe this research was a significant step in the development of a choreographic process that results in work that's "a full payoff" of all the things we have done. It was collaborative in the truest sense, but it was also personal and uniquely my creation. The work itself was unique and contemporary, while still using movement, inspiration, and structural ideas from non-Western and nonmodern dance sources. I am most excited that I have a working model for future projects that is fun and engaging and empowers performers to explore and express multiple dimensions of themselves. I look forward to its continued individuation.

CONCLUSION

"Modern dance is not less, modern is more. It's everything that has been done plus"

- Twyla Tharp

(Warren & Youngerman, 2013, p. 14)

When I began my graduate studies in modern dance, I sensed possibility and creative potential in my eclectic body. It was the tiniest inkling of something new, something important, but I could not quite identify it, and everyone around me did not seem to get it. To my prestigious university colleagues in modern dance, each movement I made betrayed a history of contamination. It was inscription or conditioning that narrowed my choices rather than expanding them. They sought to help me by ridding me of bad habits and presenting me with different aesthetic options.

Time and time again, I have found myself coming up against unspoken conditions in modern dance choreography and confronting implicit biases. But like Tharp quoted above, I believe modern dance should not be about less; it should be *more*. This research began because rather than viewing my eclectic training as a problem to be solved, I saw it as an opportunity to investigate a different approach to modern dance, an approach that returned to the historical focus on self-expression while also embracing the multiplicity of embodied experiences encountered in the global age.

At first, my aim was to propose the elimination of the idea of modern dance as a technique and style. However, in the process of researching and reflecting, I have come to realize that there is much that is distinct and valuable in the modern dance canon as it exists

now (and I couldn't imagine giving up my modern dance technique classes). Instead, I propose modern dance be "decentered" in order to share the stage with other dance forms as equals (Robinson & Domenici, 2010, p. 215). This would imply a polycentric model where dancers would engage in deep training in multiple styles and university dance departments would interweave "different dance forms, at all levels of the dance curriculum - including technique, composition, pedagogy, and history" (Robinson & Domenici, 2010 p. 214).

I also advocate for the creation of a contemporary category that is truly open to any form of individual dance creation, that does not exist on some aesthetic pedestal, but is inclusive of different worlds of dance and engages them in productive dialogue, bringing artists together to imagine new ways of being global humans. I believe contemporary dance that embraces inclusive and personal visions will resonate more deeply with dancers from a wider array of backgrounds and usher in new audiences.

Today, we live in a society where technology and globalization have changed our sense of identity, boundaries, and even time (Shapiro, 2008). The creation of modern dance in this context should not be limited by categories or the hierarchical positioning of one form over another. Outside the university, dance training has already begun to reflect these changes with dancers participating in physical practices ancient and current, from near and far, and both theatrical and social. Dancers do not restrict the sort of classes they take or choreographers they work with. Like nomads, dancers go where there are opportunities and new possibilities becoming bodies - of - ideas with significant potential to transform contemporary dance (Roche, 2011).

If we attend to these experiences as journeys of discovery, we can arrive at destinations beyond our imagination. In order to do so, we must cease treating dancers as

neutral palettes and expecting them to embody any or all styles but rather to "enable the dancer to begin to develop a signature movement identity" (Roche, 2011, p. 115).

Dance educator Sherry Shapiro (2008) writes, "dance is nothing more than a book written by the body signifying how we experience and give meaning to our world. It is through these words written by the human body that we can begin to recognize and transcend the limitations and boundaries that up to now have been closed off to new possibilities" (p. 276). By recounting my own experiences, I have attempted to show how otherness, as an embodied practice accompanied by intercultural dialogue, provides opportunities to embrace broader, more diverse ways of thinking.

Choreographer Ananya Chatterjea (2013) has said that focusing on "individuality as the core of modern dance offers hope that we might be able to invigorate a broader understanding of 'contemporary' choreography as well as, where genres are understood in relationship to other cultural forms and practices in that context" (p. 18). If dancers' movement identities are acknowledged as consisting of multiple and varied identities, then it follows that inviting the dancers' personal narratives into contemporary dance creation will inevitably lead to dance that encompasses a wide variety of styles and content and that addresses important themes and issues of our times.

My creative research demonstrates that emphasizing the eclectic embodiment found in dancers' movement identities allows for the dissolution of restrictive boundaries and the creation of innovative choreographic work. Additionally, collaborative processes enable all involved to expand their sense of being, establish relationships, and contribute to the co-creation of new aesthetics and forms of expression.

One of the things I struggled with in my creative process was finding a structure for my work. After reading Robinson and Domenici's (2010) article on intercultural dance

programs, I realized I had never studied the composition of any of the cultural forms I know. Nor had I analyzed or attempted to utilize the compositional methods in past work, only the movement. My committee once advised me to consider the structures of the other forms I was using in my work, and for a moment, I was stumped. After doing some research and recollecting my past experiences through the lens of structure, I understood how much had been missing from my experiences in technique classes. Reading this article made me long for a dance training that "provides students with opportunities to experiment with the development of cross-cultural composition and improvisation practices, as well as to engage in comparative analysis" (Robinson & Domenici, 2010, p. 217).

I have already brought these ideas into my own teaching. For example, when teaching Rumba, which features elements such as call and response and an improvisational framework amidst a highly stylized movement vocabulary, I have made the structural elements a critical part of the instruction. With the class, I have discussed and examined the different improvisational structure and formal elements in addition to the technique of the movement vocabulary. I cannot speak for my students but it has been a revelatory experience for me, one that I will take into my future teaching and composition.

Finally, I did not expect and could not have anticipated that conducting this research would uncover a way in which my own dance practice had been marginalizing and suppressing aspects of myself. Discovering I had Aspergers in the process of my solo work made me recognize the ways in which my ideals in regards to movement had excluded what is ostensibly my only natural movement. Though the issue of abilities did not become a focus of the paper, it has occurred to me that differently abled bodies also exist in a marginalized place in relation to modern dance and would benefit from more inclusive practices. I could see the research of different abilities, particularly those on the

Autism/Aspergers spectrum, in relation to choreography being a future interest area in this work along with the further development of my own eclectic choreographic practice and intercultural pedagogy.

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